Changing the Public Perception of the Contributions of Astrobiologists from Minority Institutions.

Judy Butler
Center of Excellence in Information Systems and
Institute for Understanding Biological Systems
Tennessee State University
330 10th Ave. N. Suite 265
USA
judy@dragonflyenterprises.org

Lewis Myles
Center of Excellence in Information Systems,
Dept. of Biological Sciences and
Institute for Understanding Biological Systems
Tennessee State University
USA

Todd Gary
Center of Excellence in Information Systems,
Dept. of Biological Sciences and
Institute for Understanding Biological Systems
Tennessee State University
USA

Tennessee State University (TSU) is a minority institution with a significant publication record in astrobiology. TSU astronomers have developed a completely automated observatory in southern Arizona and use its various telescopes for a wide variety of research projects, including the search for extrasolar planets. In late 1999, Greg Henry, a TSU astronomer, discovered the first extrasolar planet to transit its host star thereby providing final proof of the existence of planets around other stars and also providing the first measurement of an extrasolar planet's mass, size, density, and composition. More recently, Henry has collaborated in additional ground-breaking discoveries including the detection of the first extrasolar planetary system with a resemblance to our own solar system and the identification of the first Neptune-mass extrasolar planet. In addition to the involvement of TSU astronomers, two TSU biologists have begun research in astrobiology after completing an NAI sponsored faculty fellowship program in astrobiology.

Communicating TSU's role in astrobiology and the role other minority institutions in this field is essential in transforming the way society views the scientific contributions of these institutions. Specifically, TSU was part of the national outreach for the NOVA Origins Four-Part Television Series on PBS and in collaboration with *The Tennessean's* Newspapers in Education program created and published 14,000 copies of a 16-page magazine for middle school students with an accompanying teacher's guide. TSU was involved in creation of MIAC (Minority Institute Astrobiology Collaborative) the first "virtual" organization of minority institutes focused on research and education in astrobiology.